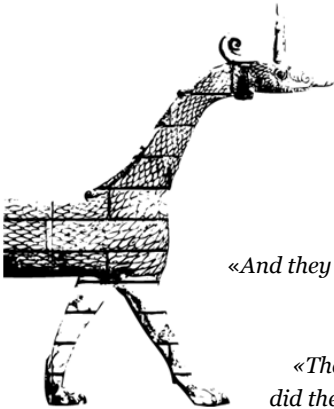


Review

Exhibition: *Torre de Babel – Historia y Mito* Museo Arqueológico de Murcia (Spain) 9th December 2010 – 20th March 2011



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«And they said, Come, let us build us a city, and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven, and let us make us a name...»

«Therefore was the name of it called Babel; because Jehovah did there confound the language of all the earth....» (Gn 11: 4,7)

Etemenanki, «House of the Foundation of Heaven and Earth», was the Akkadian name of Babylon's ziggurat, mainly known as the Tower of Babel. The myth, the religious beliefs and simple curiosity have drawn people towards its study over the centuries.

Since December 9th 2010, an exhibition focused on the History and the Myth behind the Babel Tower was held in the Museo Arqueológico de Murcia, Spain. Its commissary, professor Juan Luis Montero Fenollós, is responsible for a ten year old project about this ancient subject. This exhibition was one of the visible aspects of the project. Planned to be displayed until March 20th 2011, the exhibition's closure had to be postponed until the first of May, due to its success.

The main goal of this exhibition was to introduce the history of Babylon to the general public, displaying emblematic artifacts for the first time in Spain, mostly from the Berlin Vorderasiatisches Museum, along with computerized models and pictures of the city and its tower.

At the same time, it aimed to present old and new approaches to the Babel Tower puzzle.

The exhibition was divided in four main thematic blocks, three dedicated to the history of Babylon and its Tower, and the last one focused on the myth around the Etemenanki. Each block started with a small video-show which introduced the visitor to the different subjects and artifacts displayed in the following rooms.

The first video was dedicated to general Mesopotamian history and the first archaeological surveys held on the Babylonian territory, especially those made by the German team led by Robert Koldewey, which brought to light the ancient ruins of the city of Babylon. The following room held a timeline displaying the main periods and reigns of the Babylonian history, starting with the first dynasty, from *circa* the 19th century BC, and finishing around 330 BC, with Alexander the Great's domain of the territory. In this same room, three outstanding artifacts helped to illustrate the video and the timeline.

The first one was a fragmentary statuette representing the god Enki/Ea with a sprinkling water vase on his hands, dated from the 18th/17th centuries BC, *i.e.* contemporary to Hammurabi. It was the oldest piece displayed. The second one was a clay cylinder with a votive inscription by Nebuchadnezzar II. It was found near Sippar and describes the king's actions as a (re)builder. The third piece was a Neo-Babylonian clay tablet with an architectural plan for a building.

The second block consisted in a description of the city itself. Juan Luis Montero Fenollós underlined how difficult it is to study this famous *urbs*, because the remaining structures are dated from the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II until the Persian period. This leads to two main problems: on one hand, the short timeline between both periods makes it hard to distinguish the materials; on the other hand, the Old Babylonian and the Kassite cities remain unknown under the more modern structures.

The video explained the city built by Nebuchadnezzar II, presenting some amazing data: more than 80 thousand inhabitants in an 8 kilometer wall perimeter, with several doors, the most emblematic one being

the Ištar Gate. This one had an important role in the cultic festivities, mainly in the *Akītu* festival, because it was here that the royal procession entered the city and made its processional way towards the Esagila, the temple of Marduk. The Ištar Gate and its processional avenue are displayed in the Berlin Vorderasiatisches Museum. The video also showed pictures of the site, some dated from the first archaeological surveys and others from nowadays. It is important to stress out the magnificent three-dimensional animated models of Babylon that all videos shared.

The next room contained the major pieces of the exhibition: coming directly from the Ištar Gate and its processional avenue the visitor could behold two brick glazed panels in a blue background, one showing a mythical animal, a *mušhuššu*, and the other a lion. The first one was held in one of the tower's façade, at the Gate. The second one is part of a long series of lions that followed the path through the processional avenue (which had a total of 60 lion figures). These are large pieces, weighing each one a ton, with the approximate height of 120 cm and between 170 cm and 230 cm of length. The visitor could still observe a technical drawing of one of the lions, made in 1899 by Walter Andrae, the Berlin Museum's architect. This piece is very interesting, because it shows the different data used, at the time, to reconstruct the panels.

The third part was the core of the exhibition, dedicated to the architectonical aspects of the Etemenanki. The introducing video presented the visitors with the story and the theories around the Babel Tower since its discovery in 1913. In that year the foundations of the building were found and since then scholars have tried to find answers to three main questions: how high was it? What shape did it had? How could it be accessed? The video also contained images of other ziggurats, like the one from Borsippa, that were used as parallels and/or starting points for the different theories proposed. The different theses also based themselves in the Neo-Babylonian cuneiform documents, such as a clay tablet from the Esagila or the Oslo stele. The textual *corpora* were completed with the information transmitted by Herodotus and, of course, by the Old Testament.

The following room presented two models of how the Etemenanki should look like, according to the Universidad de Coruña team, led by Juan Luis Montero Fenollós. This proposal bases itself in a critical analysis of the ancient documents but also on materials engineering data. Considering all this, the Spanish team proposes new measures for the building: it should have been approximately 60 meters high, on a 90 meters perimeter base, with six levels, and a last floor where the temple should be. The models are made in a scale of 1 cm:1 m, having both a blue painted temple displayed on the top (blue bricks were found on the archaeological site of the Tower). The main difference between them is the access from the first floor to the temple: one, following Herodotus' information, is made by climbing a spiral form stairs, around the building; the other is made by ascending to the top following a path built in just one of the Tower's side. Professor Fenollós stressed out how the temple was the central structure and not the Tower *per se*. This one was just the physical support that held the divine house, and linked Heaven and Earth.

Again it is noticed the concern on presenting a chronological framework to the visitor, displaying a timeline with the different periods that the Iberian Peninsula, Greece, Rome and Egypt were crossing at the time the Etemenanki was finished.

Two brick sets were shown in this same room. The first one was composed by three fragmentary clay bricks, which belonged to the temple of the top of the ziggurat, containing votive inscriptions mainly dedicated to Marduk. The second set, loaned by the Museu Bíblic de Montserrat, Barcelona, presented two adobe bricks, with celebrative inscriptions by Nebuchadnezzar II. These objects, from other archaeological sites, are relevant to show the standard measures of Neo-Babylonian bricks (usually around 33 x 33 x 9 cm), used on the construction of the Etemenanki.

The last block was dedicated to the myth that surrounded the Babel Tower through the centuries. The video-show focused on this, presenting the different artistic representations of the Tower, from the 10th century AD up to today, all based in the biblical narrative,

which stresses the destruction of the building. It is pointed out it was in the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II that the kingdom of Judah and the Jerusalem's Temple were destroyed, having its religious and political elite been deported to Babylon, where they began to write their sacred texts.

Interesting enough, the visitor could see a clay tablet from Nebuchadnezzar II, containing an oil ration distribution list, where Jehoiachin, king of Judah, is mentioned. In this last room some of the artistic representations shown in the video were also displayed. The magnificent manuscript from the 10th century AD, where the Babel Tower is on flames could also be seen. This is the most ancient artistic representation of the Etemenanki known until now. There was also a painting from the 16/17th century, by Frans Francken II, that follows the spiral shape created by Jan Bruegel. The visitor could also see other paintings from the 18th and 19th centuries and, finally, a 21st century representation of the Tower made by an Iraqi painter, Hanoos, that lives in Madrid nowadays. Hanoos was born and had lived near Babylon, and his vision closed the exhibition, showing that the myth is still alive.

It is important to mention how the younger ones were not forgotten. Several pedagogical activities took place during the time the exhibition was held. Moreover, this exhibition planned for the general public offered much more than simple disclosure. Even those who dedicate themselves to the study of Mesopotamian history could learn with it. And this happens also because the Catalogue includes eleven articles by known scholars from the field, at the same time that presents a good description of all the pieces displayed. During what was planned to be the last week of the exhibition, a series of conferences that gathered in Murcia some of the most important names linked to the Archaeology and History of Mesopotamia took place.



